

Genital warts

Looking after **your** sexual health

Genital warts

Genital warts are the most common viral sexually transmitted infection (STI). They're caused by the human papilloma virus (HPV) which can be passed on during sexual contact. Not everyone who has the virus develops genital warts. For most people, including those who have visible warts, the virus will be cleared from the body over time. It's rare for genital warts to cause any long-term health problems.

This booklet gives you information about genital warts, what you can do if you're worried that you might have HPV infection and advice on how to protect yourself and your partners.

What causes genital warts?

Genital warts are caused by an infection of the skin of the genital and anal area with the human papilloma virus (HPV).

There are over 100 different types of HPV which can affect different parts of the body, including the hands and feet (a wart on the foot is called a verruca).

Approximately 30 types of HPV can live in and around the genital and anal areas but most genital warts are caused by just two types of virus (types 6 and 11) which do not cause cancer.

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How are genital warts passed on?

The virus that causes genital warts is easily passed from one person to another through sexual contact. Anyone who's sexually active can get the virus and pass it on.

- Genital warts can spread from one person to another during vaginal or anal sex.
- The virus can be spread by skin to skin contact so it can be passed on by close genital contact. You don't need to have penetrative sex (vaginal or anal) to pass it on.
- The virus won't pass through a condom but as condoms don't cover all of the genital area it's possible to infect genital skin that's not covered by the condom.
- The virus is more likely to be passed on when warts are present but it's still possible to pass the virus on after warts have disappeared.
- It's possible, but very rare, to develop warts in the mouth or throat, or on the lips from oral sex.
- Warts can be easily spread from the genital area to the area around the anus without having anal sex.
- It's possible for warts on the hand to be passed to the genitals, but this is very rare.
- If you're pregnant and have genital warts at the time, it's possible to pass the virus to the baby at birth, but this is rare.
- You can't get genital warts from kissing, hugging, sharing baths or towels, from swimming pools, toilet seats or sharing cups, plates or cutlery.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Most people with HPV infection won't develop visible warts and the virus will go away on its own. This means you may not know whether you or a partner have the virus.

If warts do appear, this can happen from three weeks to many months, or even years, after coming into contact with the virus. You might notice small, fleshy growths, bumps or skin changes which may appear anywhere in or on the genital or anal area.

- On female genitals, warts may be found on the vulva (the lips around the opening to the vagina), cervix (entrance to the uterus [womb]) and in the vagina.
- On male genitals, warts may be found on the penis, scrotum and urethra (tube where urine comes out).
- Genital warts may also be found on the upper thighs, and around or inside the anus.
- You might see or feel warts, or a partner might notice them. Often they're so tiny, or so difficult to see, that you don't know you have them.
- They can be flat or smooth small bumps or quite large, cauliflower-like lumps.
- Warts can appear on their own or in groups.
- Genital warts are usually painless but may occasionally itch and cause some inflammation.
- They may cause bleeding from the anus or from the urethra.
- If your flow of urine (pee) is distorted this may be a sign of warts in the urethra.

How will I know if I have the virus?

You can usually only be certain you have genital warts if a doctor or nurse looks at the warts and confirms you have the infection. Even if you or a partner feel sure you have genital warts, it's still advisable to have a check-up to confirm this.

You could still have genital warts even if a partner doesn't have any visible warts.

It's possible to have more than one sexually transmitted infection at the same time. A check-up for other infections is recommended if:

- you or a partner have a new diagnosis of genital warts
- you or a partner have, or think you might have, any other symptoms
- you've recently had unprotected sex with a new partner
- you or a partner have had unprotected sex with other partners
- a sexual partner tells you they have a sexually transmitted infection
- you have another sexually transmitted infection
- you're pregnant or planning a pregnancy.

How soon after sex can I be checked for genital warts?

You can be checked as soon as you think you might've been in contact with the virus. As visible warts don't always develop straight away, you'll be advised on how to check yourself for any warts that develop and what to do if you notice any. It can take between three weeks and 18 months after you've been in contact with the virus for any visible bumps to develop.

What does the check-up involve?

The main check for genital warts is for a doctor or nurse to look at the warts. They may do this using a magnifying lens.

- You may also need an internal examination of the vagina or the anus to see if there are any warts inside.
- Very rarely, it may be necessary to take a biopsy (small sample) of the wart for closer examination. Depending on the area being examined, a local anaesthetic may be used.
- There's no routine blood test for the virus.

How accurate is the check-up?

Most warts are easily diagnosed by looking at them.

Where can I get a check-up?

There are a number of services you can go to. Choose the one you feel most comfortable with. A check-up can be done at:

- a sexual health clinic or genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinic
- some general practices; ask a doctor or practice nurse
- some contraception clinics and young people's services.

For information on how to find a service see page 15.

Will I have to pay for the check-up and treatment?

All check-ups and tests are free through NHS services. Treatment is also free unless you go to your general practice when you may have to pay a prescription charge for the treatment.

What's the treatment for genital warts?

You'll only be offered treatment if you have visible warts. The treatment will depend on what the warts look like, how many you have and where they are. The aim of treatment is to remove visible warts. How effective the treatment is varies and depends on the size and type of warts, the treatment that's used and how good your immune system is at fighting the virus.

Some people don't need treatment, or they choose not to have any. However, for most people, having treatment is likely to make the warts go away more quickly. As genital warts are caused by a virus and not bacteria, antibiotics won't get rid of warts.

Visible warts can be removed in a number of different ways.

- Putting cream or a liquid on to the warts (for a few days each week). This can usually be done by yourself at home. Some people ask a partner to apply the cream or liquid for them. You may have to apply this treatment for a number of weeks.
- Freezing (cryotherapy).
- Heat (electrocautery), using local anaesthetic.
- Surgery, using local anaesthetic.
- Laser treatment, using local anaesthetic.

Some creams can weaken latex (rubber) condoms, diaphragms and caps. Polyurethane (soft plastic) types can be safely used. Ask the doctor or nurse for advice.

Some wart treatments may be uncomfortable, but they're not usually painful. Treatments can cause irritation and soreness for a couple of days, so the doctor may recommend you use some pain-relieving drugs.

- Avoid perfumed soap, bath oils, bubble baths, creams and lotions until treatment is completed as these may irritate the skin.
- Tell the doctor or nurse if you're pregnant, or think you might be, as this may affect the type of treatment you're given.
- Wart treatments sold at the pharmacy aren't suitable for genital warts.
- There's no evidence that complementary therapies can cure genital warts.

How quickly will the warts go away?

In some people the warts go away quickly but for others the warts are stubborn and treatment may have to be repeated a number of times. It can also take a while for the treatment to start working. Evidence suggests that smokers respond less well to treatment than non-smokers. If the first treatment doesn't work, another treatment may be tried. Sometimes the warts come back (see Will the warts come back? on page 10).

Do I need to have a check-up to see if the warts have gone?

If you're having treatment for the warts at a clinic or general practice it's important to return regularly for treatment. This is so the doctor or nurse can check that the treatment is working or advise if a change of treatment is needed. Many clinics don't ask you to return if you think the warts have cleared up. They'll always be happy to see you if you want advice or to be checked.

Will the warts come back?

Some people only ever get one episode of genital warts. For many others, the warts can come back. If you do get new genital warts, it's not possible to say if these are due to the original infection or a new infection.

What happens if genital warts aren't treated?

If left untreated, genital warts may disappear, stay the same, or grow larger in size or number. Over time, most warts will eventually go away without treatment. For some people this may take a long time, particularly if you have an illness that affects the way your immune system works, making it difficult to fight off infection.

It's not usually harmful to your health if the warts aren't treated but you may find them uncomfortable and may not like the way they look. Treating the warts may reduce the risk of you passing them on to someone else.

How soon can I have sex again?

You may be advised to avoid sex until the warts have cleared up. This is mainly to protect the treated area of skin from friction and to help it to heal.

Using condoms may help to reduce the spread of the virus if they're used while the warts are present and for the first three months after the warts have gone.

Will I know how long I've had genital warts?

It's not possible to tell how long you've had the virus by the appearance of the warts.

If you feel upset or angry about having genital warts and find it difficult to talk to a partner or friends, don't be afraid to discuss how you feel with the staff at the clinic or general practice.

Should I tell my partner(s)?

If you're told that you have genital warts, then it's a good idea for your current or most recent sexual partner(s) to have a check-up for sexually transmitted infections and to see if they have any warts that they haven't noticed.

Will genital warts affect my fertility?

No. There's no evidence that your fertility will be affected by having genital warts or the virus that causes them.

What happens if I get genital warts when I'm pregnant?

You should tell the doctor or nurse that you're pregnant as this may affect the treatment they can offer you.

- During pregnancy, warts often grow in size and number. They may appear for the first time or they can appear again after a long time of having no warts.
- They can be treated safely during pregnancy, though treatment may be delayed until after you've given birth.
- If the warts get very big, they may be removed to avoid problems during birth. If this isn't possible, you may be advised to have a caesarean delivery but this is very rare.
- The virus can be passed to the baby during a vaginal delivery but this is rare. This can cause an infection in the baby's throat.

Do genital warts cause cancer?

No. The types of HPV that cause visible genital warts (types 6 and 11) don't cause cancer.

Some other types of HPV can cause cell changes that may lead to cancer. For more information about HPV and cervical cancer see the Jo's Trust website at www.jostrust.org.uk

Is there a vaccine against genital warts?

Yes. Gardasil is a vaccine that protects against HPV 6 and 11 (genital warts) and HPV 16 and 18 (the types of HPV that can cause cell changes that lead to cancer).

All girls aged 12-13 years are offered Gardasil as part of a national vaccination programme.

How can I help protect myself from genital warts and other sexually transmitted infections?

The following measures will help protect you from genital warts and most other sexually transmitted infections, such as HIV, chlamydia and gonorrhoea. It's possible to get a sexually transmitted infection (STI) by having sex with someone who has the infection but has no symptoms. You can also have an STI yourself without knowing it. These steps will also help protect you from getting or passing on an infection without knowing it.

- Use condoms (male/external or female/internal) every time you have vaginal or anal sex. They can help protect you against other sexually transmitted infections and may provide some protection against getting, or passing on, genital warts, particularly if they're used while the warts are present and for the first three months after the warts have gone.
- If you have oral sex (going down, giving head), use a condom to cover the penis, or a dam (latex or plastic square) to cover the vulva (external female genitals) or the anus.
- If you're not sure how to use condoms correctly visit www.sexwise.org.uk for more information.
- Avoid sharing sex toys. If you do share them, wash them or cover them with a new condom before anyone else uses them.

Using a service

- Wherever you go, you shouldn't be judged because of your sexual behaviour or who you have sex with.
- All advice, information and tests are free.
- All services are confidential.
- All tests are optional and should only be done with your permission.
- Ask as many questions as you need to – and make sure you get answers you understand.
- The staff will offer you as much support as you need, particularly if you need help on how to tell a partner.

Where can I get more information and advice?

The National Sexual Health Helpline provides confidential advice and information on all aspects of sexual health. The number is 0300 123 7123.

It's open Monday to Friday from 9am-8pm.

For more information on sexual health visit www.fpa.org.uk or www.sexwise.org.uk

Information for young people can be found at www.brook.org.uk

Clinics

To find your closest clinic you can:

- use Find a Clinic at www.fpa.org.uk/clinics
- use FPA's Find a Clinic app (iPhone or Android).

Details of general practices and pharmacies in England are at www.nhs.uk and in Wales at www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk. In Scotland, details of general practices are at www.nhsinform.scot and in Northern Ireland at www.hscni.net

A final word

This booklet can only give you general information.

The information is based on evidence-based guidance produced by The British Association for Sexual Health and HIV (BASHH).



the sexual health charity



sexwise.org.uk

www.fpa.org.uk

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If you'd like information on the evidence used to produce this booklet or would like to give feedback, email feedback@fpa.org.uk

